

Methodological Issues for Studying Asexuality

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To date, asexuality has received little research attention and methodological issues for studying this population remain largely unaddressed. Studies have drawn on existing approaches and instruments and what asexuals themselves have learned in discoursing with each other has not always been consistently taken into account in research designs. I discuss operational definitions, sampling problems, and limitations of existing instruments in light of my own experience with the asexual community.

Operational Definitions

Asexuality has been variously operationally defined: in terms of (little or no) sexual attraction (Bogaert, 2004; Storms, 1980), sexual preference (Nurius, 1983), and asexual self-identification (Prause & Graham, 2007). In future research on the topic, I expect the two most common to be asexual self-identification and (little or) no sexual attraction.

Asexual self-identification has been operationalized in three ways: requiring people to say that they are asexual to participate in the study (Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine, in press), a free response sexual orientation question (Prause & Graham, 2007), and a forced choice sexual orientation question (Prause & Graham, 2007). Some studies have used multiple forms of these, yielding different responses. Brotto et al. (in press) used the first of these and a multiple choice sexual orientation question with an option *other*, offering a free-response. In that question, only 75% of participants chose asexual, with

other (11%) being the second most common,¹ followed by hetero-, bi-, and homosexual, respectively. Given that participants were recruited from the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) (asexuality.org) and had to endorse an asexual identity to participate in the study, this finding is unexpected and merits further study. It is possible that some individuals chose hetero/homo/bisexual in addition to an asexual sexual orientation/identity. I suggest three possible reasons. First, they may have interpreted the question as asking about romantic orientation: searching on Google reveals that, in asexual discourse, terms like *bisexual asexual* (equivalent to *biromantic asexual*, *bi-asexual*, and the alternate spelling *biaseexual*) are attested for, though uncommon. Second, they may have formerly experienced sexual attraction but no longer do and answered based on that. Third, they may consider themselves to be in the “gray area” between sexual and asexual and chose the orientation other than asexuality they were closest to. Since asexuality had already been established, some participants may have assumed the question was asking about something else.

Prause and Graham (2007) used a free response question and a forced choice question about sexual orientation, appearing in that order. In the forced choice response, 40 people chose asexual; of these, 22 also wrote in asexual. Some participants were recruited from psychology classes, others from the Kinsey Institute’s website, and some from asexuality.org, although the website was available to anyone who accessed it online. While the source of participants was not reported, likely a large number of the 22 who wrote in *asexual* came from asexuality.org. If true, this would mean that, in a sample of people not chosen on the basis of sexual orientation, a majority of those who chose

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¹ Responses for *other* included terms such as *heteroasexual* and *biromantic asexual*. In asexual discourse, these are subcategories of asexuality based on a distinction between sexual orientation and romantic/affectional orientation (cf. the AVEN wiki entry for “lexicon” at <http://www.asexuality.org/wiki/index.php?title=Lexicon>).

asexual on a forced choice question do not actively identify as asexual, probably identifying as *heterosexual* or *unsure*. I suggest three hypotheses for future research. First, asexuals (free-response) will have spent more time thinking about asexual identity and spent more time trying to decide if they are asexual or not. Second, asexuals recruited online will more closely fit the definition of asexuality on AVEN's front page because it has likely had a significant impact on their decision to identify as asexual. Third, asexuals recruited online are likely to be strongly influenced by asexual discourse in terms of the categories they use to think about their own experiences.

Experiencing (Little or) No Sexual Attraction

Two questions immediately arise. First is the question of an absolute versus a gradient definition. Asexuals can be defined as “people who do not experience sexual attraction” or as “people who experience little or no sexual attraction.” Second is the question of time. In Bogaert (2004), asexuals were individuals who selected “I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all” on a forced choice question, requiring asexuality to be lifelong and absolute. Hietpas-Wilson (2007) used data from a longitudinal study of youth, middle or high school aged in the first interview, where they were asked if they had ever felt a romantic attraction to a male and if they had ever felt romantic attraction to a female, allowing for four possible combinations. In subsequent interviews at two-year intervals, they were asked if they had had an attraction to a male since the previous interview and if they had had an attraction to a female in that time frame. There were participants who were not asexual (perhaps, more appropriately, aromantic) in one of the first two interviews who were asexual in one or more of the subsequent interviews, highlighting the issue of fluidity. The way that asexuality is defined in the asexual community allows for fluidity over time, often by focusing on asexual identity.²

Sampling

One option is to recruit off of asexual websites (Brotto et al., in press; Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008). All three of these studies have used AVEN, by far the largest asexuality site. There is another site that may be useful in the future: the asexual community on LiveJournal (LJ): asexuality.livejournal.com. Recruiting there, in addition to AVEN, is likely to substantially increase the number of responses but may introduce a gender confound because LJ might have a strong bias towards female users. Recruiting from AVEN, and possibly LJ, is unprob-

lematic for qualitative research, but poses serious problems for quantitative studies. Ideally, quantitative data about asexuality would come from samples without online recruiting. Other than the difficulty of obtaining a large enough sample of asexuals, there is the difficulty of creating an operational definition high in specificity and sensitivity.

The definition “a person who does not experience sexual attraction,” even if regarded as technically accurate, is functionally problematic. People who have never felt sexual attraction do not know what sexual attraction feels like, and knowing whether or not they have ever felt it can be difficult; this is regularly seen on the AVEN forums. This problem is compounded by the fact that many asexuals do feel nonsexual forms of attraction. In early 2008, members of the AVEN project team, wanting to have information about AVEN users, posted a survey on the site and received 247 asexual responses, of whom 146 (59%) reported having a romantic orientation towards others compared to 43 (17.5%) who were aromantic.³ In asexuals not recruited from asexual communities, it is likely that many do not realize that the attractions they do feel are not sexual attraction. People questioning whether or not they are asexual can take a long time trying to answer these questions. On a survey, they need to decide quickly, including, and especially, asexuals unfamiliar with asexuality. Practically, this means that simply assuming all participants understand *sexual attraction* to mean the same thing is likely to result in unreliable data, though this problem is not limited to studying asexuality. Diamond (2008) stated, “The problem with trying to define sexual attraction is that researchers know very little about how individuals experience sexual feelings” (p. 126). Because of this, Diamond asked interviewees, women who had experienced some amount of same-sex attraction, what they meant by attraction and found “a diverse range of responses that seemed utterly incomparable to one another” (p. 127). It may be useful to create a survey asking about specific feelings, sensations, and fantasies, possibly similar to the one used by Storms (1980). Measuring affectional orientation as something separate from sexual orientation is also important, especially because asexuals are not the only people whose affectional attractions do not match their sexual attractions (Diamond, 2008).

One major difficulty with such an instrument, however, is how to do it without assuming a strict gender binary. In the above-cited AVEN survey, of the 172 asexual participants assigned a female gender at birth, only 137 (80.1%) identified as female along with 8 (4.7%) who identified as female with reservations (i.e., *nominally female*); responses that were neither male nor female were the second most common group, followed by identifying as male. A similar trend was found with those assigned male at birth. Although merely an informal survey, it is suggestive.

Brotto et al. (in press) studied gender differences among asexuals and, at the very beginning of their survey, there was

² See, for example, the general FAQ on AVEN, <http://www.asexuality.org/home/general.html>.

³ http://www.asexuality.org/home/2008_stats.html.

a forced choice question about sex giving only *female* and *male* as options; 27 people (12.6%) did not answer. Brotto et al. were uncertain how to interpret this but suggested it may be due to issues relating to gender identity as it was unlikely participants did not see the question.

Developing New Instruments to Study Asexuality

When studying a topic that has received little research attention, using existing tools is easier than developing new ones, but there is the danger that existing tools are inadequate for that subject. With respect to asexuality, there are two potential dangers with using existing tools that could make the results either uninteresting or misleading: questions assuming universal sexual desire/attraction and values embedded in constructs devaluing low/no sexual desire.

If surveys contain statements presupposing sexual attraction (e.g., “When I’m sexually attracted to someone, I...”) requiring a response on a Likert scale, these may be appropriate for studying sexuals, but asexuals would likely be confused how to answer because the item asks about agreement or disagreement with the main clause when the subordinate clause is true, not whether the subordinate clause is ever true; because of presupposition failure, a non-answer may be the only remotely accurate one.

Problems with studying asexuals using surveys on sexual function/dysfunction are highlighted by Brotto et al. (in press). After completing various surveys, some participants offered unsolicited comments about the study, which were then forwarded to the researchers. One criticism was that some of the questionnaires were felt to be more appropriate for people who experience sexual attraction but were irrelevant for asexuals.

The second problem, closely related, deals with difficulties stemming from sexual-normative values underlying some surveys. Prause and Graham (2007) noted that “Implicit in the

debate about what constitutes a ‘normal’ level of sexual desire is an assumption that *some* level of sexual desire is normative” (pp. 341–342, emphasis in original), highlighting the challenge asexuality poses to this assumption. To what extent does the assumption that sexual desire is normative function in existing surveys?

The concept of “sexual dysfunction” stems from using a medical model to understand human sexuality and, as such, it is fundamentally value-laden, including some values many asexuals are likely to object to. Although medical models are useful in many contexts, I do not expect studying asexuality with sexual function/dysfunction measures to be particularly enlightening, to provide much understanding of this population or to effectively explore how questions raised by studying asexuality can inform and enrich the study of human sexuality more generally.

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